

What do I do with all the leaves and grass clippings from my yard?

Grass and leaf disposal is a concern among homeowners. There are many ways to safely dispose of your grass and leaves.

1. Compost yard waste at home. Composting at home reduces fuel and air emissions from hauling the yard waste and is a safe and environmentally sound method of managing leaves and other yard trimmings. It can be a simple process that involves placing yard trimmings and other organic materials in a pile or bin. Turning the compost pile periodically allows for adequate amounts of moisture and air, encourages microbial growth, and speeds decomposition. Adding green grass clippings, manure, certain food waste, or some other source of nitrogen to the leaves will help quicken the decomposing process through the winter. The nutrients from this pile can then turn a poor, clay soil into a rich, productive soil and a compacted soil into a well-aerated soil. See the *Home Composting* brochure at www.deq.state.mi.us/documents/deq-wmd-swp-homecomposting.pdf and additional composting information at www.mastercomposter.com or contact your county's [MSU Extension Office](http://www.msu.edu/extension) for assistance in setting up a composting unit.
2. Use mulched leaves in your gardens, around trees and bushes, and as a protective covering for some plants. Till the leaves into your vegetable garden or annual flower beds. Another use for leaves is rose protection from winter winds and bitter temperatures. After covering the crown of your rosebushes with dirt, put a wire fence, about the height of the rosebush, around the entire plant. Then take your mulched leaves and fill them up no more than six inches inside the wire fence. There is a drawback to this practice, however – mice and other rodents may like the protection, too; and it is necessary to remove the leaves in the spring before the plants overheat. Talk to the MSU Master Gardeners in your area for more information on proper plant care. Master Gardener information is at web1.msue.msu.edu/mastergardener.
3. Use a mulching lawnmower and let the grass and leaves stay on your lawn. Try to do this when the leaves are dry and are no more than an inch thick. This will make the process much easier and less hassle. Mulching provides several benefits. The particles absorb water from the rain and from other moisture. Over time they release the absorbed water back into the grass and the surrounding area, like a sponge. This provides water during periods when water may not be available from rainfall or other sources. Also, after some time, worms, bacteria, and other organisms transform the leaves and grass clippings into rich nutrients which will continue to feed trees, shrubs, and other plants year after year. Keep in mind, however, too thick a layer of mulched leaves and grass or too many whole leaves can mat down and kill your grass.
4. Take your leaves, grass clippings, and other yard waste to a community or commercial composting operation. Check with your [local recycling/composting contacts](#) to find out what options are available locally. Some community programs sell the finished compost or provide it to community residents for free.

Here are some things you do NOT want to do with your leaves:

1. Do not burn the leaves because it is harmful to your health and the environment, and in many communities leaf burning is illegal.

Burning is one of the worst ways to get rid of leaves. Breathing particulate matter can increase the chances of respiratory infection, reduce the volume of air inhaled, and impair the lungs' ability to use that air. Particulate matter will affect one in every six people. Higher risk people include children under 10, people over 65, pregnant women, people with asthma, people with chronic respiratory diseases, smokers, people with heart disease, and people with allergies. Open burning can lead to grass or serious forest fires and can be a safety hazard for children when there is not adequate supervision. From an environmental perspective, the nitrogen and phosphorus released from burning leaves in the form of particulate matter can contribute to areawide pollution and damage lakes and other water resources.

A list of Michigan Townships and Cities with Open Burning Ordinances is at www.deq.state.mi.us/documents/deq-whm-stsw-openburnord.pdf. Additional information about open burning is at www.michigan.gov/deqair "Clean Air Assistance" and then select "[Open Burning Information](#)" under the Compliance Assistance heading.

2. Do not dump leaves into streams, rivers, or lakes because excessive leaves can damage aquatic environments. Grass clippings, leaves, and other debris dumped in the water will decompose over time. This decomposition uses up the oxygen in the water which is needed by fish and other aquatic life. It also increases the gilvin (darkness) of the water. With increased gilvin, the temperature also increases due to the darker water absorbing more sunlight. Increased temperatures will harm many types of aquatic life in our lakes and streams.
3. Do not take leaves and grass clippings to landfills or incinerators for disposal. In Michigan, yard waste and grass clippings are banned from landfills or incinerators unless they are diseased or infected. Before the yard waste ban in Michigan (1995), it was estimated that yard clippings made up about 20 percent of the annual solid waste disposal.